

THE CRIMSON-COLLARED GROSBEAK

BY GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

MANY a person who has journeyed about northeastern México following the principal highways has passed through the habitat of the Crimson-collared Grosbeak (*Rhodothraupis celaeno*) without even glimpsing the bird. Finding it sometimes requires careful search in the thicket. I have never seen it near Monterrey, but it is fairly common along the Río Camacho, a few miles southwest of Linares, Nuevo León; and in the Victoria region of Tamaulipas it is almost abundant. Along the Matamoros-Victoria highway I have encountered it as far north as Jimenez. It is endemic to eastern México, having been reported only from the states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, San Luis Potosí, Veracruz and Puebla. It inhabits the low country chiefly, though my friend L. Irby Davis informs me that he has seen it regularly, though in small numbers, in summer among the sweet gums at an elevation of 3400 feet on the highway between Antigua Morelos and San Luis Potosí. Along the Río Sabinas, in southern Tamaulipas, it ranges only a short way above river-level. So far as I have been able to ascertain, it is non-migratory.

It is a little heavier than the Cardinal (*Richmondia cardinalis*) and has no crest. The adult male is hardly a gorgeous bird—but the dull red of his 'collar' and under parts is of a peculiarly Mexican shade which calls to mind ripening cactus fruit, hibiscus flowers half hidden by dark foliage and shadow, or a bright serape seen in the gathering dusk. The immature male and adult female are dull black on the head and chest, and olive green otherwise, with a yellowish wash on the hind neck, lower breast, belly, and wing linings.

I first saw *Rhodothraupis* in 1938 along the Río Santa Engracia (the highway marker then called it the Corona) a few kilometers north of Victoria. In dense clumps of shrubbery which sometimes completely covered certain flat, gravelly islands, I continued to see the plump, almost dumpy looking birds—not knowing, of course, what they were, but guessing that they were fringillids because of the obvious heaviness of their bills. They all seemed to be olive-green (there happened to be no adult males in the flocks), and I was much impressed by the way in which they tore off and munched mouthfuls of leaf. They sat in the shrubbery by the hour, it seemed, chewing away, sometimes letting pieces of the leaf drop and pensively reaching out for more. So far as I could see they were subsisting wholly on the thick, soft leaves of one species of plant—a shrubby nightshade, *Solanum verbascifolium*. In my notes I referred to the birds as 'leaf eaters'. They were, I found, not fat but very tender skinned. Their stomachs held a mass of chewed up leaves, a little gravel and traces of insects, but no seeds. Some of the specimens were partly spoiled by the time I

got them to the skinning table. The slipping of the throat and breast plumage was caused to some extent by the plant juice from the crop.

For some time I thought that all of these 'leaf eaters' were olive-green. I heard no song from them and their only call note seemed to be a thin, high, penetrating squeal. I heard from them no incisive *chip* like that of the Cardinal. One day I saw a black and red bird among them. When I watched this wonderful creature sitting among the nightshade, biting off chunks of leaf with its big bill, I realized that it was a 'leaf eater' too. My excitement, as I followed it about, can be imagined. Immediately after collecting it I painted its portrait (see frontispiece).

The song of *Rhodothraupis* is rich and full throated, resembling somewhat that of the Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*), but having fewer curved or warbled notes. It is sung from the heart of a tree or thicket, rarely from the top. Seeing the singing bird requires careful slipping along the trails or waiting in the brush. The singer turns his head this way and that, usually standing straight and lifting his crown feathers. I have heard much singing from about the middle of March to early June.

The only Crimson-collared Grosbeak nest I ever saw was one found by Ernest P. Edwards on May 20, 1947. It was in a thicket not far from a trail near the Río Sabinas in southwestern Tamaulipas. It was of rather loose construction, not very deeply cupped, and thinly lined. It held three eggs. These were much like Cardinal eggs, but seemed to be larger and blunter. They were pale grayish blue in ground color, spotted all over with brown. The newly hatched young were orange-skinned with red mouth-lining and dark dorsal down (see Sutton, Lea, and Edwards, 1950. *Bird-Banding*, 21: 57). Edwards spent much time in a blind near this nest and saw the female come to it several times. He never saw the male at the nest, however.

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